WORLD CHRONICLE

UNITED NATIONS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DURATION: 28'01" TRANSCRIPT AS BROADCAST

PROGRAMME: **"WORLD CHRONICLE"**

GUEST: Tayseer Abdel Jaber, Executive Secretary
Economic and Social Commission for
Western Asia (ESCWA)

JOURNALIST: Bhaskar Menon, PTI-TV, India
Marian Houk, Christian Science Monitor
Khalil Matar, Assharq Al-Awsat, London

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

POST GULF-WAR ERA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Tayseer Abdel Jaber, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), discusses the difficulties ESCWA members would face in the post Gulf-war era. He estimates that both Kuwait and Iraq would need hundreds of billions of dollars for reconstruction.

"WORLD CHRONICLE" is produced by the Information Products Division
Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York,
N.Y. 10017. U.S.A.

Executive Producer: Kamil Taha
Director: Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistants: Diane Barkley
Eloisa Ugalde

Programme No. 426 Recorded on 8 March 1991

READEX FICHE

VOICE From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

What does the future hold for the economies of the Arab nations of the Middle East - a region which for the past 40 years has suffered from an unstable political and military climate. In the wake of the Gulf war, the issue of how the area can tap its human and financial resources is once more on the agenda. Since its establishment in 1973, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, or ESCWA, has worked to foster the development of the region. It brings together 13 nations to encourage collective efforts to tackle regional problems.

Our guest today, Tayseer Abdel Jaber is Executive Secretary of ESCWA. An economist and a former Minister for Labour and Social Development in his country, Jordan, Mr. Abdel Jaber has been head of ESCWA since February 1989.

He will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Bhaskar Menon of PTI-TV of India; Marian Houk of the Christian Science Monitor; and Khalil Matar of Assharq Al-Awsat of London.

Mr. Abdel Jaber, welcome to **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Executive Secretary, first of all, perhaps you could tell us a bit about the functions of a regional economic commission in the UN system?

ABDEL JABER: Well, ESCWA is one of the five regional economic and social commissions of the United Nations covering all parts of the world. ESCWA, as you said, was created in 1973, after an office which was in Beirut to cover all Arab countries in western Asia. Its function basically is to foster, as you said rightly, economic development, encourage regional co-operation in all areas, help these countries mobilize their human resources, their financial resources and reach common grounds in various areas of co-operation.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is it mostly a research institution, Mr. Abdel Jaber?

ABDEL JABER: As you know, in the UN, there are two types of institutions: one, basically a research, advisory, technical institution - which ESCWA is one of them - and the other one is operational where they basically implement projects in the countries concerned dealing with agriculture, industry and otherwise. ESCWA is basically a research, think-tank advisory institution.

LITTLEJOHNS: We mentioned in the introduction that the membership is mainly or perhaps wholly Arab but west Asia also covers Iran, Israel, Turkey - why are these countries not members?

ABDEL JABER: ESCWA member countries were covered by UNESOB, the UN office in Beirut and these countries were not party to any other regional commission in Asia or Africa. So they took direct membership of the new regional commission which is ESCWA. Iran, Turkey, Israel were not members of the office in Beirut but I remember that Turkey and Iran applied for membership in the mid-seventies and it is up to the member countries in ESCWA to decide to accept a new member or not. At that time they had not thought it fit to be having new members.

LITTLEJOHNS: In the present state of affairs, you think there is a possibility that the Commission's membership might be expanded?

ABDEL JABER: Well, of course, it is left to the member countries and the other countries concerned. First of all, according to the UN procedure, we have to receive an application by the new country willing to join ESCWA. And secondly, it's my role to have this application presented to the Commission in its annual ministerial meeting and it's up to countries concerned. But, of course, it may be, with the newer regional concept for economic co-operation and wider co-operation, that it's the right time to have other countries join.

LITTLEJOHNS: Any additional membership would be subject to approval by the Economic and Social Council and the UN General Assembly?

ABDEL JABER: That's right. First of all, it has to be approved by the Commission of ESCWA itself, by its ministerial session and then the ECOSOC has to decide on that and afterwards the General Assembly.

MENON: Mr. Jaber, one of the basic political and economic problems which the region faces is a lack of democracy in most of the countries of the region. Decisions are made by leaders without the interest of the people at heart and with the result, there is an enormous volatility. How do think that this problem might be solved in the new circumstances that now prevail?

ABDEL JABER: Democracy and other political developments are not direct concern to ESCWA Secretariat of which I am the Executive Secretary, but we feel that improving economic conditions and dealing directly with social and economic problems would help to give the people - the average citizen - better expression of his needs, better expression of his opinion and his position. Of course, this is basically the UN role and this is our role in the region.

HOUK: Mr. Abdel Jaber, aside from geographical proximity and the common Arabic language, it seems that the countries who are members of your organization have very little in common right now. There is so much mistrust that exists between them as a result of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. It is hard to see how there can be co-operation. I'm sure there will be a dispute over whether or not the Organization returns to Baghdad, for example.

ABDEL JABER: I agree with you that it is now quite difficult to start in terms of strengthening co-operation, particularly in the economic field for all countries in the region. But even before the Gulf war, there was also some regional groupings in the area. We had the GCC - the Gulf Co-operation Council - among six member countries of the Gulf states and we had also the Arab Co-operation Council with members, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and Yemen. In a sense, there was sub-regional co-operation. There were examples where countries

opted to further their co-operation than waiting for all countries of the region to agree on. I think, we have to go ahead with our co-operation programmes in various areas. It's not only the common language, it's also trade, labor, investment, energy, water. We have a lot of involvement. We have a lot of things to talk about, technical things and very important things to the future of the region.

MATAR: So how is the co-operation feasible now especially in the post-war era mainly in having to deal with Iraq and Kuwait?

ABDEL JABER: Both countries are members of ESCWA. We have kept our contacts with both countries even during this Gulf crisis. They are receptive to our programmes because we deal, for example, with basic things like survey of conditions of children, let's say, or we have population census or we calculate figures on trade or payments. We help them in pin-pointing development priorities and these things will continue to be there and we may not be able to tackle joint projects between these two countries in the coming future but I think at the country level, there is a lot to help and to work with these two countries and they are also part of regional projects.

MENON: Mr. Jaber, the Gulf war didn't last very long but its impact on the region has been enormous in economic terms. And one of the major results of it has been probably long-term hemorrhaging of Arab resources out of the region into western banks. Do you have any figures on this and what the possible impact might be?

ABDEL JABER: The impact depends on the time period you have in mind but definitely it had grave economic effects on the region, its resources, its co-operation. In the

initial six weeks after 2 August we had about 25% of the deposits with the banking system taken and sent abroad to foreign banks. We also had about 2 million workers, in a sense, displaced from Kuwait and Iraq. We had also a lot of human as well as infrastructural damage. It is true but we take it as a fact now. We now have to help re-build, to reconstruct.

MENON: Could I ask you, what do you mean when you said 25% of deposits were taken and transferred to foreign banks, what exactly does that mean?

ABDEL JABER: It means quite a number of billions of dollars.

MENON: What was done with it?

ABDEL JABER: Every individual depositor simply went to his bank account in the Gulf, not only in Kuwait - it was all over the Gulf countries and ESCWA countries in general - they withdrew their deposits or part of their deposits and deposited them abroad.

HOUK: Have either Iraq or Kuwait approached you for help in developing their reconstruction plans or any other country that was damaged as result of the warfare?

ABDEL JABER: First of all, we have been approached by almost every country to help them in assessing the impact of the Gulf crisis on their economy and we have already finished the number of reports outlining detailed economic impact for almost every individual country in our region. We are also going to assist both countries, Iraq and Kuwait, in the reconstruction effort but, of course, we would be simply an individual agency among many of the UN agencies and efforts towards that objective.

HOUK: Do you have any estimate of how much the reconstruction is going to cost for both countries?

ABDEL JABER: They are now very rough estimates and they range very widely. In Kuwait, some even feel that at least 50 billion dollars - they go up to 100 billion. Of course, that will wait specific estimates on this specific calculation. In Iraq, there was the estimate given by an Iraqi deputy Prime Minister, saying that it will cost up to 200 billion dollars in terms of reconstruction or infrastructural and other projects.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Abdel Jaber, President Bush has said that not a dime of the American taxpayer's money is going to help pay for the reconstruction of Iraq. The United States has been a major contributor to most development projects under the UN. Where is the money coming from? You've spoken of enormous sums of money, where is it going to come from?

ABDEL JABER: I listened to that statement and I believe at that time probably, it was very much of a political standing but I think also there is a commitment on the part of the United States and the world community to help, not necessarily financially, but also to help prepare a proper atmosphere and environment for co-operation, reconstruction and humanitarian effort and also to help re-elevate the sanctions or take away the sanctions of Iraq because if Iraq is going to finance its own reconstruction, they have to export something. They have to export oil which is their main export.

MATAR: How are you going to deal with these sanctions especially with you having to move back to headquarters in Baghdad?

ABDEL JABER: Working from Baghdad requires, of course, on our part, facilities on communications and living conditions which will be favourable to our staff members. Our staff members are about 300. With their families, they are more than a thousand people there but in terms of sanctions, I believe we can function not waiting for the sanctions to be raised, to be taken away. We will have some agreement with the Iraqi government where we can import some of our required foodstuffs and other needs.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE.** Our guest is Tayseer Abdel Jaber, Executive Secretary of Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

MENON: Mr. Jaber, during the height of the cold war, the Economic Commission for Europe played a key role in getting the East and the West in Europe to talk, to come to terms with each other, in a way, and that led to a number of other things which finally, as you can see, led to 20-30 years down the line, led to a resolution between East and West. In your own region there has been a hot and a cold war between Israel and the Arab countries for more than a generation now. Do you envisage ESCWA playing any kind of role in getting a kind of lasting settlement?

ABDEL JABER: In the case of the Economic Commission for Europe, both east and western European countries were full members of the Economic Commission there, and they sat down together discussing detailed technical issues like transport, industry, trade and others. In our case, Israel is not a member of ESCWA. Of course, the efforts to deal with the Palestinian question lie very much beyond our capability. The UN will be involved but we have really to see to it that the international community, the US, will take immediate action towards solving that problem.

HOUK: Mr. Abdel Jaber, but Palestine, I believe, is a full member state in your Organization. Have you developed development plans for a Palestinian state? Have you done a census of the Palestinian population? How are your plans progressing on developing Palestine?

ABDEL JABER: Palestine is a full member in the ESCWA Commission. We have, through our own regular work programmes, devoted enough attention and good attention to following up issues and problems in the occupied Palestinian territories. Now, we are producing a report to the ECOSOC in its summer session dealing with Israeli practices towards water and land in the occupied territories. We have done a lot of studies and surveys on the occupied territories.

MATAR: We have Palestine and also the south of Lebanon that have suffered of Israeli occupation, especially socially and economically. Are there any studies right now to tackle those issues now that we see that Lebanon is getting some security back?

ABDEL JABER: I have been already in correspondence with the Prime Minister of Lebanon and I'm scheduled to visit Lebanon to discuss also our role in the reconstruction of that country. I believe they have to go through a lot of institutional arrangements where development, planning and institutional building has to take place. We will be ready to help Lebanon in that area.

MATAR: Do you have any security problems in the south of Lebanon mainly to deal with these issues, if you are dealing with the south?

ABDEL JABER: We're not dealing particularly with the south because it is basically programming for Lebanon as a whole. We don't have specific projects or plans, economic and social, for the south until and unless the government of Lebanon requests our assistance in that area.

MENON: One of the key characteristics of the region is religion. It is perhaps more than any other world region focussed on religion. In a rather basic way, it affects politics, it affects its economics and of course, it's deeply cultural. To what extent do you think Islamic fundamentalism is a response to political defeat and is there anything you can do about it? Is there any way that a set of policy planners sitting around a table in ESCWA can say this is a problem that springs from these factors, "we have to do something about it". Do you consider it a problem at all?

LITTLEJOHNS: It is, after all, Economic and Social Commission.

ABDEL JABER: We consider fundamentalism as a trend taking place and being strong and getting stronger in the region but my personal feeling is that it is actually an outcome of continued frustration in that region for so many conflicts which have not been resolved over the years. The occupation by Israel of Palestine, Palestinian territories, Golan Heights, south of Lebanon, the conflict in Lebanon for 16 years, the Iran-Iraq war. All these continuing conflicts have actually encouraged and induced going back to the original cultural heritages which probably will make it difficult for somebody to modernize that part of the world. But I think we should help moderates in that region by helping to solve these conflicts which are mentioned.

HOUK: Sir, during the Iraq-Kuwait crisis, there was a lot of discussion of the difference between the haves and the have-nots in the region and especially Kuwait was actually vilified for not sharing its oil wealth equitably with other Arab countries and for using it to its own purposes. The Kuwaitis, I think were very deeply hurt and startled and hurt by the discussion and they said they had given aid directly to governments; they were not responsible for what the governments did with it, but that they would re-evaluate the situation when they regain their country. How do you see this discussion leading in this part of the world?

ABDEL JABER: I see that, of course, there was some assistance given by Kuwait and the Gulf countries to other Arab countries in ESCWA and otherwise and they have been even contributing to some regional funds like the Arab Monetary Fund or the Arab Economic Fund for Social and Economic Development but it's a matter of how much actually. I think the argument raised was based on the magnitude. The feeling is that there wasn't enough aid given but it's not whether aid was given or not. It was given. The magnitude was not enough and the disparity continues and it continues even widening because of simply the unbalance in population resource in both the Gulf as well as the other member countries of ESCWA.

HOUK: If I could follow up, do you think you could persuade the countries who have a lot of wealth at this point - if they have much left of it - to share or do you feel they are going to resist this as a result of their resentment?

ABDEL JABER: I think they have decided already in the Gulf Co-operation Council Summit in Doha in December last year to establish a fund for regional co-operation and economic development. Establishing a fund, of course, differs from sharing. I think the idea of

sharing is not going to be taken literally but, through that fund, they could assist and help in development projects in other countries.

MATAR: In that sense, how can you institutionalize these funds? I think you helped in building what I see is the Arab Planning Institute in Kuwait, the Arab Institute for Training in Baghdad and others. Have you seen that these institutions are effective and are you going to go on the same path?

ABDEL JABER: These institutions have been very helpful in providing training, technical advice, co-operation, in their fields in planning and statistics and they are still functioning successfully until now. We believe that we can help in explaining, in drafting the regional reconstruction furd policies, various arrangements, financial organization, who's going to get and how. We will have a role in that and I'm planning to also consult with the Gulf Co-operation Council Secretariat on that matter.

MATAR: You said the one in Kuwait is still working?

ABDEL JABER: It moved to Tunisia for a while temporarily and it continued its programme at a lower level but it survived and I think they will go back soon to Kuwait.

MENON: During the 70's, I think at the United Nations especially, people had got accustomed to the countries of the Middle East playing a very substantial role in shaping the international agenda. Under the new circumstances, it seems that the region is turning in on itself. Would that be a correct assessment?

ABDEL JABER: We have to take some time trying again to re-establish an order in that region. There had been meetings recently also discussing regional security and regional co-operation but I think the region will continue playing a very important role in the world economy, in the world political arena. It's a matter of time but, I think, we will actually get rid of the impact of the Gulf war.

HOUK: Again, as a result of the crisis, there's been a lot of discussion about a regional-wide agreement to reduce weapons, to eliminate weapons of mass destruction and to reduce military expenditures of member states. In the case of Iraq, I think the figure was 25% to 35% of its income spent on building up its military. Do you see the organization as playing a role in encouraging the reduction of military expenditure across the region?

ABDEL JABER: We see it all over in that region, in different countries, that a higher percentage of their budget is being spent on armament and it's basically due to their insecurity because of the continuing conflicts in that area. We have been burdened by long-standing conflicts more than any other region perhaps in the world and I think the best way to reduce allocation of money and effort to armament would be to help solve these conflicts. Definitely we as a regional economic and social commission always pin point that any funding spent on armament would be at the expense of social and economic needs and we would like more allocation to these ends.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is the population roughly of this group of countries, the 13 countries who are members of your Commission. What's the total population?

ABDEL JABER: We have 120 million people.

LITTLEJOHNS: And what is the average gross national product?

ABDEL JABER: We have for this region 300 billion dollars as gross national product.

LITTLEJOHNS: 300 billion dollars, but that's mostly from oil revenues. Do you foresee that oil revenues are going to rebound in the near future?

ABDEL JABER: It seems that the prices will be under pressure basically because of competing production in the region. There is a need for funding from Iraq, from Kuwait and other countries. So I think the prices will be under pressure in the coming future.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Abdel Jaber, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Our guest has been Tayseer Abdel Jaber, Executive Secretary of ESCWA. He was interviewed here at United Nations headquarters in New York by: Bhaskar Menon of PTI-TV of India, Marian Houk of the Christian Science Monitor and Khalil Matar of Assharq Al-Awsat of London.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

****

Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: **WORLD CHRONICLE**, United Nations, Room S-827, New York, New York 10017, USA.

WORLD CHRONICLE is broadcast worldwide and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This programme is a public affairs presentation of this station from United Nations Radio and Television.

Additional information material about the United Nations can be obtained by writing to the Public Inquiries Unit, United Nations, Room GA-57, New York, New York, 10017, USA or the UN Information Centre in your country.